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Military spouse, mother of three graduates with honors and renewed confidence

December 16, 2020



When Lee Ann Hitt enrolled in undergraduate studies at Georgia Southern University after a 15-year hiatus, she was ready to invest in herself again. Yet, lingering insecurities nipped at her. Did she still have what it takes to succeed in an academic environment?

In her home state of Missouri, Hitt had a rocky first-go at college following health issues and the subsequent loss of a full-ride, Air Force ROTC scholarship. Later, she became a military spouse and mother of three, and put her desire to return to her studies on the back burner to raise a family.

In 2018, Hitt's husband, Nicholas, was assigned to serve as an instructor in Georgia Southern's Army ROTC program. By then, their children were in school and she decided it was time to refocus on her education.

Previously an honors student, Hitt tepidly matriculated at the University to work toward a degree in history. However, soon after joining classes on campus, she knew she was in an environment to thrive.

"This university was very different from the large university I originally attended in central Missouri," said Hitt. "Like the rest of Statesboro, it is a community with a much more personal feel. Classes are smaller, there are more discussions and more group projects. People here care enough to invest in students personally, and that makes all the difference."

The personal outreach was especially vital to her learning process in the beginning, as Nicholas was deployed to Fort Knox, Kentucky, for several months and she suffered a miscarriage and had to have surgery.

History professor Michael Scott Van Wagenen, Ph.D., reached out to Hitt.

"He got real with me, and he also gave me a pep talk," she remembered. "He wrote out a coupon for '1 Free Mistake.' Later, I won first place on both major class projects and earned an A-plus. We now jokingly call that coupon my Dumbo feather. I had what it took within me the whole time. I just needed confidence in myself."

Earlier this year, Hitt was on track to graduate in the fall and excited about an internship at Fort Pulaski and the chance to present her research at the Center for Undergraduate Research and Intellectual Opportunities Symposium. But when the pandemic hit in March, her children were sent home from school, and her external educational opportunities were put on hold. Mid-May, her grandfather died from complications from COVID, and her father fell ill from it.

During "a scary time," Hitt remained on track, taking five summer classes virtually, including an internship with Special Collections at Henderson Library, while still at home with her children. Together around the clock, she completed her work most evenings after they went to bed.

Throughout all of this, she continued to receive mentorship remotely.

"My professors fostered something special in me," said Hitt. "Dr. Steven Engel, dean of the new Honors College, gave me a second chance with an honors experience at a university. I also learned a lot from my

thesis mentor Dr. Olavi Arens on the Armstrong Campus. The fact that he was born in Estonia and speaks and reads languages that were central to my topic, brought wisdom, experience and knowledge to my project. He also had more than a few late nights with me, helping me whip my thesis into shape.”

Hitt’s perseverance paid off with exemplary grades. She also garnered the History Department’s Jack and Addie Averitt Foundation Merit Scholarship and Max O’Neal Award, bestowed upon the student with the best history paper.

“I am extremely proud of myself for being able to complete my bachelor’s degree and finish strong with five consecutive semesters of straight As,” she said. “I am proud that I demonstrated dedication and the importance of an education and being a lifelong learner to my classmates and my children. The support of my husband and others in my community was essential. As a child who grew up in a military family, this is the 18th place in the world that I have called home. Statesboro is a community of people who care. It is unique, and my friends here are very special to me. Not everyone experiences that kind of success in life.”

With a National Parks Service internship on the horizon and her eye on a master’s degree, Hitt will cross the ceremonial stage this week, diploma in hand, knowing she has what it takes to succeed.

“I have discipline, organization, motivation and experience in overcoming obstacles,” she said. “I am living proof that when you want something bad enough, you can accomplish almost anything.

“The right amount of adversity builds strong people and creates resilience. I want my children, and other young people to do the hard things. They are worthwhile; a sense of accomplishment, pride and self-worth are crucial to life satisfaction. Go after your goals in life!”

Georgia Southern University, a public Carnegie Doctoral/R2 institution founded in 1906, offers approximately 140 different degree programs serving almost 27,000 students through 10 colleges on three campuses in Statesboro, Savannah, Hinesville and online instruction. A leader in higher education in southeast Georgia, the University provides a diverse student population with expert faculty, world-class scholarship and hands-on learning opportunities. Georgia Southern creates lifelong learners who serve as responsible scholars, leaders and stewards in their communities. Visit GeorgiaSouthern.edu.

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